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ABSTRACT

Noting that breaking off romantic relationships can be traumatic even when the end is welcome, this paper describes the strategies and stages of relationship termination and suggests ways for instructors of oral interpretation and/or interpersonal communication classes to illustrate such relational decay. The first section deals with relationship termination strategies, identifying M. J. Cody's five general strategies: behavioral de-escalation, identity management, justification, de-escalation, and positive tone. Examples of statements made by persons using each termination strategy are included, but not examples of specific situations. The second part of the paper looks at M. L. Knapp's five stages of relationship decay: differentiation, circumscription, stagnation, avoidance, and termination. The paper notes that stages are said to be useful, but as with the strategy list, a lack of specific examples reveals a need for something more. In the third section, oral interpretation of literature is suggested as a means for providing students with concrete examples of the relationship termination strategies and stages. Passages suggested come from novels, poems, and plays such as: "The Picture of Dorian Gray" (Wilde); "Jude the Obscure" (Hardy); "Candida" (Shaw); "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" (Albee); "The Lion in Winter" (Goldman) and "Brideshead Revisited" (Waugh). The paper indicates stages and strategies exemplified in each passage, and suggests that performing these scenes in communication classrooms will facilitate lively discussion and encourage the examination of the complexities of real life relationships experiencing termination. (SKC)

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"The End Could Be Just the Beginning": The Study of Relationship Termination Through The Performance of Literature

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The process of dissolving a relationship is one clouded by pain, fear, and yet many times, relief. While very few of us would wish to experience such a trauma, the fact remains that relationships can regress, become weaker, and result in what has been referred to as relationship termination.[1] Although not "all relationships end, and not all endings are bad,"[2] the partners in a relationship must recognize that they are not an isolated dyad and that they can, indeed, competently handle a potential termination.

One innovative approach an instructor of oral interpretation and/or interpersonal communication can incorporate in the classroom is the integration of literature to illustrate such relational decay.[3] Admittedly, much research has approached the conceptualization of relationship termination in terms of strategies[4] and stages.[5] Unfortunately, however, such research is limited in direct application as it fails to provide students with situations representative of those strategies and stages. Thus, particularly useful as pedagogical tools in facilitating discussion and enhancing student understanding of relationship termination are performances of literary texts which overtly demonstrate characters experiencing this inevitable occurrence. Through such a technique, our students can gain a better understanding of plausible applications of the theoretical and empirical research in this area.

From this standpoint, the purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to investigate current research of the strategies and stages in relationship termination, (2) to examine selected poems, plays, short stories, and novels for dramatic scenes which illustrate various strategies and stages.

STRATEGIES

Contemporary researchers of relationship termination have isolated the identification and classification of relationship termination strategies. A classic investigation by Michael Cody provides an example of such strategies. What emerges from his study is a grouping of disengagement strategies. Encapsulating statements from students who were asked to recall a breakoff of a heterosexual relationship make up such a typology.[6]

Cody argues five general termination strategies: Behavioral De-escalation, Identity Management, Justification, De-escalation, and Positive Tone. His findings seem most appropriate to highlight since the results illuminate the influence of relationship termination on an individual's self-concept, an intergral element in any relationship.[7]

Behavioral De-escalation is based on the premise that direct communication about the disengagement should be avoided. This strategy focuses on individuals reducing the frequency and duration of interpersonal contacts across time. In doing so, the interactants avoid discussing the issue of termination. This avoidance also prevents a potential destruction of an individual's self-concept while he/she adjusts to the termination of the relationship. Additionally, since this strategy seeks to avoid the probable tensions provoked by a direct confrontation with the partner, the inevitable negative influences on either individual's self-concept do not exist. Moreover, the termination becomes an ambiguous situation.

Statements exemplifying this strategy include:

> I didn't say anything to the partner. I avoided contact with him/her as much as possible.

> I never brought up the topic of breaking off the relationship, I just never called the person again and never returned any of his/her calls.[8]

The focus of Negative Identity Management is on protecting the individual's self-concept. This strategy assumes that a person will disengage from a relationship so as to allow himself/herself an opportunity to feel good. As Cody has stated, there is a "lack of sensitivity to the target's potential feelings of rejection."[9] Thus, there appears to be little, if no concern for the other individual's self-concept.

Cody identifies the following statements in this strategy:

> I told him/her that life was too short and that we should date other people in order to enjoy life.
>
> I said that I thought we might ruin our relationship all together if we didn't start dating around a little because I was not happy.[10]

The third strategy classified in Cody's typology is termed justification. Quite simply, those individuals engaging in justification attempt to terminate their relationship through a mutual agreement. The interactants in this strategy conclude that a continuation of the relationship would result in each hating the other. Hence, termination is appropirate since it is for the benefit of both partners.

The following statements illustrate this strategy:

> I fully explained why I felt dissatisfied with the relationship that it hasn't been growing and that I believe we will both be happier if we didn't date anymore.
>
> I said that I was really changing inside and I didn't feel good about our relationship anymore. I said that we'd better stop seeing each other.[11]

When De-escalation occurs, a direct confrontation of the termination takes place. This fourth strategy maintains that the partner will freely express his/her desire to discontinue interpersonal contact, yet assumed in such a contention is the possibility of future interaction. In other words, one party may admit to himself/herself that he/she did not really end the relationship altogether; there is the chance that future encounters indicate a continuous relationship. In doing so, an individual has avoided destroying the other's self-concept and has indeed, demonstrated a concern for that self-concept.

Representative statements in this strategy include the following:

> I told him/her that while I was happy most of the time I sometimes felt that I can't do all the things I wanted to. I then said that we should call it quits for now and if we wanted to get back together, we will.
>
> I told him/her that I needed to be honest with him/her and suggested that we break it off for awhile and see what happens.[12]

The Positive Tone strategy has at its core a genuine concern of the other party. Assumed in this strategy is a relationship disengagement without a sense of guilt about how the other partner feels. Thus, a person may terminate the relationship and feel comfortable that the other person is also comfortable with that termination.

Exemplyifying statements include:

> I told him/her that I was very, very sorry about breaking off the relationship.
>
> I tried very hard to prevent us from having 'hard feelings' about the break-off.[13]

While it is important to examine the foregoing research of Cody to specify his typology, his investigation fails to illustrate specific situations depicting each strategy. For instance, in what type of dyad and under what conditions might one engage in a Positive Tone strategy? Can the Negative Identity Management strategy have a positive result on the relationship? The use of excerpts from literary texts might be better able to illustrate such specifics.

STAGES

Looking specifically at the "coming apart" of a relationship, Mark Knapp has identified five stages in which people experience relationship decay: Differentiating, Circumscribing, Stagnating, Avoiding, and the actual Termination itself.[14] Knapp's research is also germane since it provides an additional dimension in studying the end of a relationship--examining the termination phenomenon in terms of stages.

Communication in the differentiating stage is marked by how little the two individuals in the dyad have in common. Since the word differentiation means to distinguish or to separate one thing from another, a relationship depicted in this stage undergoes a change from a "we do" philosophy to an "I do" approach. This individualization takes precedence over all matters. As a result, individual identity is stressed in this stage.

The second stage noted by Knapp is circumscribing. In this stage, there is "less total communication in number of interactions as well as depth of subjects discussed, and communications of shorter duration."[15] Thus, a relationship in the circumscribing stage experiences communication restricted to topics in "safe" areas. Communications about the weather and sports are not uncommon with partners in this stage. Bates and Johnson refer to such communications as "coffee talk."[16]

A relationship in the stagnating stage is at a standstill. Low levels of communication are manifested in this stage. A dyad in stagnation is

characterized by increased apathy and hostility between partners. Most often, the relationship is on "hold" to develop a constructive means by which to solidify an alreaddy weakening bond. While some of the messages sent in this stage are nonverbal, others are "carefully chosen and well thought out."[17]

When individuals enter the avoidance stage, they will exert as much energy as needed to eliminate all interaction. Hence, the communicators will avoid any face-to-face encounters. Cues may be subtle such as "I'm very busy tonight; I won't be able to make it" or quite blatant statements such as "Don't call me anymore." Additionally, physical avoidance may often be nonverbal as well. For example, a husband may not eat in the same room as his wife and she in turn, may read a book when he interacts with her.

The final stage, termination, involves one or more of the interactants making it clear that the relationship is over. It is quite common, however, that the majority of communications taking place pertains to the future of any potential relationships with that partner. Furthermore, logistical issues such as ownership of material possessions and the payment of bills are settled as the partners progress through their termination stage. Comments representative of this stage may include "I don't want to see you again" or "We need to end this relationship right now."

Based upon the preceding, it is clear that studying the termination of a relationship in stages is both necessary and resourceful. Nonetheless, many times an instructor must yield to the concerns of students in this uncomfortable area. What types of concerns? Most often, students desire, and rightfully so, life-like situations illustrating challenging issues. Since the notion of termination encompasses many complex principles and, of course, personal experiences, students understand most fully when equipped

with scenarios representative of the research in the area (e.g. strategies and stages). What may be one of the most appropriate methods available to an instructor are scenarios from dramatic scenes in literature depicting various research areas in the study of relationship termination. The following discussion exemplifies such a practice to employ.

SUGGESTED SCENES FROM LITERATURE

Rather than implying that the following literary works stand as definitive examples, the authors of this essay merely offer them as representative illustrations of the kinds of scenes found in poetry, prose fiction, and drama which can be integrated in the communication classroom. Individual instructors, urged to pull from their own reading when assigning texts, may find that the complexity of literary texts (including those used here) may well allow for the placement of a given text in more than one category of relationship termination. The ambiguity may, indeed, be a blessing for the communication instructor; class discussions may benefit from an examination of how different interpretations may result in a text's placement in a different category. Excerpts follow which denote three of the strategies and three of the stages.

In the preceding discussion of Negative Identity Management, it was argued that one individual chooses to end a relationship for the maintenance of his/her own self-concept. No regard is given to the feelings triggered in the former partner resulting from the breakup. In Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, Dorian chooses to end his relationship with Sybil Vane because she no longer fulfills his fantasy of being a great actress. Disgusted with her abyssmal performance in Romeo and Juliet in front of his dearest friends and, most importantly, humiliated by his association with her. Dorian ruthlessly ends their once loving affair:

"I'm going," he said at last in calm clear voice. "I

> don't wish to be unkind, but I can't see you again. You have dissappointed me."
>
> She wept silently, and made no answer, but crept nearer. Her little hands stretched blindly out, and appeared to be seeking for him. He turned on his heel and left the room.[18] In a few moments he was out of the theatre.

Sybil Vane is left disconsolate, heartbroken. We later learn that Dorian's leave-taking precipitates her suicide.

Another example of Negative Identity Management may be found in Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure. Sue Brideshead ends her relationship with her former lover Jude Fawley because of her desire to become a faithful, Christian wife to Philloston. Although Sue still loves Jude and loathes her husband, her overriding need to view herself as a conventional, proper wife propels her toward terminating the relationship:

> "Why do you tempt me so far, Jude! It is too merciless! . . . But I've got over myself now. Don't follow me--don't look at me. Leave me, for pity's sake!"
>
> She ran up the church to the east end, and did as she requested. He did not turn his head, but took up his blanket which she had not seen and went straight out. As he passed the end of the church she heard his coughs mingling with the rain on the windows, and in a last instinct of human affection, even now unsubdued by her fetters, she sprang up as if to go and succour him. But she knelt down again, and stopped her ears with her hands till all possible sound of him had passed away.[19]

Justification, as discussed, is marked by a mutual agreement to end

a relationship for the well-being of both parties. In Bernard Shaw's Candida, the final scene of the play serves as an illustration. Forced by her husband Morell and the effete poet Marchbanks, Candida must choose between the two men:

> Morell: We have agreed--he and I--that you shall choose between us now. I await your decision.
>
> Candida: Oh! I am to choose am I? I suppose it is quite settled that I must belong to one or the other.
>
> Morell: Quite. You must choose definitely.[20]

Candida selects "the weaker of the two"--Morell. Marchbanks, albeit reluctantly, accepts Candida's decision with equanimity and departs: "Let me go now. The night grows impatient."

Differentiation occurs when couples seek outside activities, amusements, or emotional involvements (either sexual or nonsexual) separate from their partners. In Robert Frost's "Home Burial" an interesting variation of this stage occurs. After the death of her child, a young wife turns from emotional support outside her marriage. Unable to share her grief with her husband, Amy searches for solace in a nameless, faceless outsider (presumably a woman friend). Her husband, frustrated from being emotionally shut off from his grieving wife, trys to stop her from leaving their home in pursuit of comfort:

> She moved the latch a little. "Don't--don't go.
> Don't carry it to someone else this time.
> Tell me about it if it's something human.
> Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
> Unlike other folks as your standing there
> Apart would make me out. Give me my chance."[21]

The poem ends with the wife's emotional exit and the suggestion that the termination of the marriage is in the near future.

Characterized by apathy and open hostility between partners, a relationship in the stage of stagnation falls "into a rut"--moving for an undetermined length of time neither toward resolution nor final termination. The marriage of George and Martha in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? by Edward Albee may rightfully be considered a classic example of a relationship in stagnation. Years of hostile wordplay have honed their talents in inflicting vicious insults at each other to high polish. They have developed over the years an intricate set of mind games (including their imaginary son) which supply them with conversation and allow them to endure a hollow marriage. The opening scene of the play shows their tendency to fixate on trivial subjects:

> Martha: What a dump. Hey, what's that from? 'What a dump.
>
> George: How would I know what. . .
>
> Martha: Aw, come on! What's it from? You know. . .
>
> George: . . .Martha. . .
>
> Martha: What's it from, for Christ's sake?
>
> George: What's what from?
>
> Martha: I just told you; I just did it. 'What a dump!' Hunh? What's that from?
>
> George: I haven't the faintest idea what. . .
>
> Martha: Dumbbell! It's from some goddamn Bette Davis picture. . . some goddamn Warner Brothers epic. . .
>
> George: I can't remember all the pictures that. . .
>
> Martha: Nobody's asking you to remember every single goddamn Warner Brothers epic...just one! One single little epic! Bette Davis gets peritonitis in the end...she's got this big black fright wig she wears all through the picture and she

gets peritonitis...but she decides to go to Chicago anyway, and. . .

George: Chicago! It's called Chicago.

Martha: Hunh? What...what is?

George: The picture...it's called Chicago...

Martha: Good grief! Don't you know anything? Chicago was a 'thirties' musical, starring little Miss Alice Faye. Don't you know anything?[22]

Although by the end of Albee's searing play we sense that George and Martha have finally achieved a kind of resolution, years of stagnation have preceded the night of the drama's action.

Other texts illustrative of the stage of stagnation include James Goldman's The Lion in Winter in which Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine vie with Albee's George and Martha for the most volcanic of marriages. Another marriage exemplary of this stage may be found in George Meredith's sonnet sequence "Modern Love." Here we witness the slow disintegration of a marriage due to a husband's discovery of his wife's infidelity. In Sonnet XVII, the husband narrates a dinner party scene in which his wife and he maintain the public facade of a happy marriage in order to cover up the private decay. Although their "performance" at the dinner party is convincing (even to the point of their own mutual admiration), the relationship is a sham. The husband mentally addresses his friends on the state of his marriage: "Dear guests, you now have seen Love's corpse-light shine."

The avoidance stage is distinguished by one or both partners consciously choosing to avoid the other. In Lillian Hellman's The Little Foxes, Regina admits to her husband that she has concocted a lie to avoid him sexually for years:

> Regina: It was almost as if I couldn't stand the kind of a man you were--(Smiles, softly) I used to lie there at night, praying you wouldn't come near--
>
> Horace: Really? It was as bad as that?
>
> Regina: (Nods) Remember when I went to Doctor Sloan and I told you he said there was something the matter with me and that you shouldn't touch me any more?
>
> Horace: I remember.
>
> Regina: But you believed it. I couldn't understand that. I couldn't understand that anybody could be such a soft fool. That was when I began to despise you.[24]

Regina's revelation causes Horace's fatal heart attack.

The possibility of "backfiring" of avoidance techniques are explored in John Cheever's short story "The Five-Forty-Eight." After enjoying a one-night sexual encounter with his secretary Miss Dent, businessman Blake discovers her past history of mental instability and has her fired:

> The next day, he did what he felt was the only sensible thing. When she was out for lunch, he called personnel and asked them to fire her. Then he took the afternoon off. A few days later, she came to the office, asking to see him. He told the switchboard girl not to let her in.[25]

The rest of the story, in which Blake nearly loses his life at the hands of Miss Dent, exposes the cowardice and dangers inherent in avoidance.

At the stage of termination, we witness the "final goodbye"--the death of the relationship. This last stage appears in several of the literary texts already examined (e.g. The Picture of Dorian Gray and Jude the Obscure). In Evelyn Waugh's novel Brideshead Revisited, Julia Flyte and Charles Ryder realize that their passionate relationship has

come to its end. Julia, feeling centripetal forces pulling her back toward the Roman Catholic Church, can no longer continue her affair with Charles. Like Sue Brideshead in Jude the Obscure, Julia must end the relationship in order to maintain a positive self-concept dependent on Christian principles. Having predicted the termination of their relationship, Charles grudgingly accepts Julia's decision:

> Julia said: "Here in the shadow, in the corner of the stair--a minute to say goodbye."
>
> "So long to say so little."
>
> "You knew?"
>
> "Since this morning; since before this morning; all this year."
>
> "I didn't know until today. Oh, my dear, if you could only understand. Then I could bear to part, or bear it better. I should say my heart was breaking, if I believed in broken hearts. I can't marry you, Charles; I can't be with you ever again."
>
> "I know."
>
> "How can you know?"
>
> "What will you do?"
>
> "Just go on--alone. . . . I've always been bad. Probably I shall be bad again, punished again. But the worse I am, the more I need God. I can't shut myself out from His mercy. That is what it would mean; starting a life with you without Him. . . . [I]f I give up this one thing I want so much, however bad I am, He won't despair of me in the end.
>
> Now we shall both be alone, and I shall have no way of making you understand."

"I don't want to make it easier for you," I said, "I hope your heart may break; but I do understand."

The avalanche was down, the hillside swept bare behind it; the last echoes died on the white slopes; the new mound glittered and lay still in the silent valley.[26]

Here then ends the relationship between Charles and Julia.

As stated, these texts are offered simply as representative examples of the kinds of scenes available in literature. The instructor may choose to implement this interpretative perspective in the classroom from a variety of methods. One instructor may wish to assign a collection of complete texts to be read by the class as a whole; another may feel that only selected scenes (with summaries of preceding action supplied by the instructor) would suffice. From the selected texts students may choose or be assigned the scenes to be performed in class. The performances, besides simply serving as stimulants for class discussion, engage the students more fully in the analysis of relationships undergoing the effects of termination.

The intention of this paper has been to present one approach to the study of relationship termination in a communication classroom. Conceptualizing relationship termination in terms of stages and strategies, current research is thought provoking but lacks direct application of theory for class discussion. Student performances of literary texts offer such an application. The performances facilitate lively discussion and encourage the examination of the complexities of "real life" relationships experiencing termination.

NOTES

[1] Mark L. Knapp, Interpersonal Communication and Human Relationships (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1984).

[2] Gerald M. Phillips and Julia T. Wood, Communication and Human Relationships (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1983), p. 180.

[3] See also Cynthia Rasmussen, "'To Be Or Not To Be . . .'" Teaching Relational Maintenance Competence Via Oral Interpretation," Paper presented at the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association Conference, 7 Nov. 1981. Joseph A. DeVito briefly refers to dramatic scenes in literature and film in his discussion of the deterioration of interpersonal relationships in his text The Interpersonal Communication Book, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1983), p. 441. James Van Oosting supports our research inquiry by noting that using literature as a tool for building theory construction is not appropriate. He states, "...my complaint is a specific abuse of literature in the supposed service of an empirical methodology" (p. 218). See Quarterly Journal of Speech 71 (1985). Additionally, Sandra Ragan and Robert Hopper argue for using conversational methods for entering and exiting romantic relationships. Although their empirical study has tangential relevance to our research, it is appropriate to isolate their study for further reference in the utilization of literature and relationship termination strategies. See Communication Quarterly 32 (1984), 310-317.

[4] M. J. Cody, "A Typology of Disengagement Strategies and an Examination of the Role Intimacy Reactions to Inequity and Relational Problems Play in Strategy Selection." Communication Monographs 49 (1982) 163.

[5] Knapp, pp. 40-44.

[6] Cody, p. 163.

[7] For further information on self-concept in relationship termination, see "Relational Termination: The Effects of Sex and Type of Relationship on the Selection of Relational Termination Strategies" by Dan DeStephen,

presented at the national conference of the Speech Communication Association, Chicago, 1984.

[8] Cody, p. 163.

[9] Cody, p. 158.

[10] Cody, p. 163.

[11] Cody, p. 163.

[12] Cody, p. 163.

[13] Cody, p. 163.

[14] Knapp, pp. 40-44.

[15] Knapp, p. 41.

[16] Marilyn M. Bates and Clarence D. Johnson, Group Leadership (Denver: Love Publishing Co., 1972), p. 80.

[17] Knapp, pp. 41-42.

[18] Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1986), Ch. vii (p. 93).

[19] Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc. 1978), Pt. VI, Ch. viii (pp. 309-10).

[20] Bernard Shaw, Candida, Act III, in The Nature of Drama, ed. Hubert Heffner (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959), pp. 524-27.

[21] Robert Frost, "Home Burial," lines 56-61, in The Poetry of Robert Frost, ed. Edward Connery Latham (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), ed. Edward Connery Latham (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), p. 53.

[22] Edward Albee, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (New York: Pcket Books, 1972), Act III (pp. 3-5).

[23] George Meredith, "Modern Love," sonnet xvii, line 16, in The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circles, 2nd ed. Cecil Y. Lang (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 306.

[24] Lillian Hellman, The Little Foxes (New York: Viking Press, 1970), Act III (pp. 124-25).

[25] John Cheever, "The Five-Forty-Eight," in Points of View, ed. James Joffett and Kenneth R. McElheny (New York: New American Library, 1966), p. 385.

[26] Evelyn Waugh, Brideshead Revisited (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1945), Bk. II, Ch. v (pp. 340-1).